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French Corn Growers and Biotechnology

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Report Highlights:

At their annual meeting, French corn growers called for the authorization of biotech corn varieties, especially varieties to fight against two new pests: the corn root worm, which has been detected in France for the second year in a row, and corn earworm (*Heliothis armigera*), which damaged 10% of the 2003 sweet corn crop. French corn growers, the leading French farmers union (FNSEA) and more than a thousand scientists have also started circulating a petition condemning repetitive biotech test plot destructions across the country and calling for more biotech authorizations.

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The French Corn Growers Association (AGPM) held their annual meeting on September 17-19 in Le Mans, Western France, and one of the main topics discussed was the biotechnology issue.

1. Corn Growers Are Anxious to Grow Biotech Varieties to Protect Corn from two Pests recently arrived in France

As every year at their annual congress, AGPM clearly stood in favor of growing biotech corn varieties in France, when producing these varieties is technically and economically justified. AGPM representatives stated that producing biotech corn varieties would be the best ecological response to agronomical problems they encounter. They cited two examples: *Diabrotica virgifera* (corn root worm) and *Heliothis armigera* (corn ear worm).

While the corn root worm has been in the United States for more than a century, it is a new pest in Europe and was detected for the first time in France in 2002 in the Paris basin area. In 2003, it was also detected in the Alsace region (Eastern France). Consequently, French corn growers are particularly interested in the methods used in the U.S. to protect corn against this pest. The delegation of the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) present at the AGPM congress widely discussed this question and reviewed crop rotation, seed treatment and production of biotech corn varieties resistant to the corn root worm as the tools used by American farmers to protect corn against this pest infestation.

In 2003, the abnormal heat and drought in France in August and September favored the infestation of sweet corn by the corn ear worm on 10% of the total French area planted to sweet corn (4,000 ha out of 40,000 ha) and caused major damages. This pest usually infests African countries where temperatures are higher than in France. French sweet corn growers believe that planting biotech sweet corn varieties resistant to this pest would have limited the drop in French sweet corn production recorded in 2003 (current estimates are for a 20% decline from 2002).

2. French Corn Growers Angry with Biotech Test Plot Destructions

In summer 2003, anti-biotech activists destroyed a number of biotech test plots, all of them corn varieties:

- Root worm resistant, created by the French company Biogemma (subsidiary of the Limagrain planting seed group),
- Roundup resistant corn (Monsanto),
- Corn borer resistant corn created by the French public planting organization GEVES (which includes private planting seed companies, the French MinAg and the National Research Institute in Agronomy-INRA),
- Corn variety created by Bayer Cropscience,
- Several corn varieties resistant to the corn borer and the corn root worm (Syngenta),
- Corn variety for pharmaceutical treatment of cystic fibrosis (Meristem Therapeutics, subsidiary of Limagrain),
- Two test plots of conventional corn varieties were also destroyed (Limagrain and Pioneer).

To protest against these test plot destructions, which have occurred every summer for the past few years, 8 research scientists started a petition in early September 2003 entitled: "Research and Innovation are of great help to our competitiveness, do not devastate French research." The petition is currently circulating for signature and will be sent to the French government. More than a thousand scientists have signed it, as well as economists,

ecologists and agronomists. The French corn growers and the leading French farmers union (FNSEA) also signed it. At their General Assembly, French corn growers regretted that French policy makers don't react strongly enough to condemn these destructions and don't act more quickly to authorize biotech production in France.

3. Starch Industry

The corn processing industry (or starch industry) in France has imposed strict guidelines on French corn growers so that they will not be supplied with biotech corn. However, at the General Assembly of AGPM, representatives of the starch industry said they were not ideologically opposed to biotech, but have to supply non-biotech products to their customers, i.e., the second-level corn processing industry. This includes mainly breakfast cereal processors, the brewery industry, and extruded corn product makers. These second-processing industries face pressure from consumers and supermarket chains and prefer not to include biotech ingredients in their products.